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ABSTRACT

A study examined how international students from North and West Africa fit in, cope, manage, and respond to their experiences in American Universities that are in many cases set up in the context of Americans who constitute the majority. Assuming that the lives of international students outside their home countries and cultures are communication-based experiences, this research attempts to understand the various relationships between culture and communication and the difficulties members of different cultures encounter when they interact or attempt to interact. Data for the phenomenological study was generated from in-depth interviews with seven male African graduate students at Ohio University. In spite of the multiplicity of responses, the intersubjective experience revealed the existence of a number of obstacles and barriers that make interaction and understanding difficult among different cultures. These include intense feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration; dealing with classroom generalizations made on the basis of what the American professors considered to be mainstream (white Anglo-Saxon) America; and dealing with professors who consider it a waste of time trying to help international students who are not proficient in spoken English. Coping strategies developed by the African graduate students include drawing closer to other international students, attempting to minimize the tension of what is culturally unfamiliar and/or alienating, and considering the dominant culture to be stupid and responsible for their plight and therefore isolating themselves from interacting with the dominant culture. Contains 15 references. (NH)

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LIFE EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN GRADUATE STUDENTS IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SETTING: A CASE STUDY

by
Ransford Antwi and Abdelali Ziyati

To many minority students gaining admission into graduate school is an important landmark in their lives. This is especially so where the persons involved are international students pursuing graduate programs in American institutions. Studying abroad may have its excitements, expectations and anxieties but it may also have its disappointments. These excitements, expectations, frustrations and even disappointments may be fused together to form rich and meaningful experiences to those involved. Fundamental issues relating to spatiality, relationality, corporeality and temporality tend to impact differently on the experiences of African students pursuing higher education in the United States.

It is usual for university administrators to provide figures to show how well they are doing in creating a multi-cultural environment on their campuses. Some of them remark that the world is their campus. Multi-culturalism is, in part, a way of creating an open atmosphere for the learning of different viewpoints and the acceptance of these kinds of differences. In recent years, therefore, there has been emphasis in many educational institutions in the United States to speed up efforts at attracting, encouraging and recruiting international students. Success in attracting students of different cultural backgrounds have led many university administrators into praising multi-culturalism. But the rhetorics of multi-culturalism did not

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seem to reflect the lived experiences of the African graduate student.

In this investigation, the lived experiences of some African graduate students are explored through a phenomenological study. Our goal was to examine how international students from North and West Africa fit in, cope, manage and respond to their experiences that are in many cases set up in the context of Americans who constitute the majority. The starting point of this research therefore, lies within the assumption that the lives of international students outside their home countries and cultures are communication-based experiences. Research in this area is basically an attempt to understand the various relationships between culture and communication and the difficulties encountered when members of different cultures interact or attempt to interact (Kennan, 1981). It is only when there is a clear awareness of how these interactions are experienced that issues relating to cultural understanding and multi-culturalism can be meaningfully addressed.

The project was then initiated to understand African Students' experiences in graduate school at Ohio University. However, the very first interviews moved the whole project in a slightly different direction. The project, then, focuses on how African students make sense of their life experiences in the USA in its totality. It is through the narration of the traumas and excitements that some unanticipated epistemologies may be unearthed.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of our research is based on the minority experience. Color, numbers, and linguistic ability are among the determinants of racial status in the United States. According to Wellman

(1977 p. 35) the subordination of people of color is functional to the operation of American society, and the color of one's skin is a primary determinant of people's position in the social structure. The dominant whites obtain and enjoy privileges and advantages that are disproportionate to what the minorities obtain in their social, economic and political lives. Structural discrimination theorists believe that the social arrangements and accepted ways of doing things within the dominant group may disadvantage some social categories to the benefit of others. Among the structures of society listed are the laws, economic system, the administration of justice, health care and the educational sector (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989 p.217). The educational setting has been delineated for special consideration and analysis in this study.

It is possible for people to attach different meanings to the concept of minority. Using the criteria of relative powerlessness, visible differentiation from the majority, negative stereotyping and unfair treatment, Eitzen and Zinn (1989:203-4) describe eight minority groups by "(1) race (2) ethnicity (3) religion (4) impoverishment (5) sex (6) deviant groups like homosexuals (7) the aged and (8) the physically different." For African students, race and ethnicity easily mark them as different from the dominant (white) Americans and they will be referred to as the 'minority' in this study.

The focus on North and West African graduate students for the study was shaped by the fact that we (the researchers) come from Africa. Being from Africa and having similar cultural backgrounds constituted an important element in the existential philosophy: intersubjectivity (Stewart &

Mickunas, 1974). Intersubjectivity in this context refers to the existence of a basic understanding between researchers and narrators relating to the sharing of cultural values. Although the cultural values may be similar the experiences and excitments of graduate school are not the same. In this respect, therefore, there is a constitution of a cultural community of African students.

Methodology

Phenomenology is both a method and a methodology (Polkinghorne, 1989). Phenomenology contextualizes the phenomenon under study and provides researchers with research tools and procedures for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences as expressed and described by the actors themselves. The study is carried out following a four-step procedure: in-dept interviews, description of the initial themes arising from these interviews, reduction of the themes into major ones, and finally interpretation. The methodology is based on the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.

Data for the phenomenological study was generated from in-depth interviews we had with seven African graduate students at Ohio University, Athens. This approach was used because it allowed the African graduate students to narrate their experiences in their own style and manner. Like Sondra Hale (see Gluck & Patai, 1991 p.123), we did not lay claim to being objective observers because "each interview, each episode of observation and each form of content" had been affected by our previous experience as African graduate students. Yet, we were compelled to bracket (phe-

nomenological epoche) our personal presuppositions and perspectives in order to arrive at the narrators' existential descriptions. This allowed us to maintain a horizontalization of the themes that emerged from the narrations.

The narrators -- all male -- fell into what may be aptly described as convenient sampling of our friends. Arranging interviews with the narrators was not difficult since they all seemed eager to help us succeed with our academic programs. We used open-ended questions and a general interview guide to allow the narrators to express their own experiences in their terms (Nelson, 1989; Patton, 1980). Each interview was different and might have been influenced by either the relationship we had with the narrators or the lessons we had learned from previous interviews.

It must be stated at the onset that the descriptions of the narrators represent the state of affairs at the time of the interviews. The experiences narrated cannot be said to be the total truths but rather "inherently partial, committed and incomplete" texts (Salazar, 1991 p.98). But partial and incomplete as the experiences may appear they are part of human culture which is not a "static object of analysis but a multiplicity of negotiated realities within historically contextualized communicative processes" (Salazar, 1991 p.98). The various experiences recorded have all been shaped by the settings and the historical contexts within which the interviews were conducted.

Description of initial themes

In spite of the multiplicity of responses the intersubjective experience

allowed us to discern the existence of intense feelings of isolation, loneliness and frustration among many of the narrators. Forced to learn the language of the institution, these persons found themselves disadvantaged and unable to define the new culturally diverse environment in which they had been thrust without much induction.

Loneliness and Isolation

Our sedimented body is a comportment of activity which forms the background for the way we see things, and what we select as significant and worthy of concentration. We realized that the mode of awareness of the narrators had had to shift from Africa to the U.S. The shift implied that what gave them meaning in Africa had also changed. There was therefore a re-signification of their socially accepted life. The correlation and intentionality fulfilled at home could not be fulfilled here in the United States. Consequently, our narrators[1] had found themselves in a state of unfulfilled expectations and frustration. They expressed intense feelings of loneliness and isolation in the U.S. in general and in graduate school in particular. "I have left behind my wife and children and for the first time I have to stay alone."[a] Battling with this unanticipated loneliness and at the same time coping with the demands of graduate school becomes very difficult. One of the narrators stated, "I have never lived alone except here and I find it very

[1] The narrators are identified in the text as follows:
a: first narrator from Nigeria
b: second narrator from Nigeria
c: first narrator from Ghana
d: second narrator from Ghana
e: first narrator from Morocco
f: second narrator from Morocco
g: narrator fromTunisia

difficult to cope with this type of loneliness" [e]. Another said, "There is nobody to talk to. The Americans always appear to have limited time for you." [c] Persons experiencing loneliness in their graduate programs because they are conscious of the existence of a gap in their relationship look for avenues for filling up the vacuum.

Social Rituals

The social rituals and time constitution are different in the dominant culture and the university environment has heightened it. In some cases there is a move from seasonal time into a different constitution of time and speed, in which rain or shine the task has to be done, assignments have to be completed and submitted, examinations taken, and so on. The fragmented time affects social rituals.

The rather fleeting "Hi" greetings do not convey the feelings of relationality and communality to the African student as intended by the American. The African student is accustomed to spending more time performing this social ritual -- asking about one's health, spouse, children, farm, and others. In addition, "hi" is used in the Ghanaian language, for instance, to drive domestic animals (like goats, dogs, cats, sheep) that are up to some mischief around the house. "Hi" connotes repulsion, "get-out-of-my way," unwelcomeness. The narrators considered the greeting "superficial" [b] and that it conveyed quite the opposite of the intended message.

In addition to the linguistic interpretation, 'Hi' as a ritual may mean: I am expected to perform a civil responsibility, I'm not about to engage in a

conversation with you. In contrast to the African experience, here, everything is so neatly regulated that everybody knows what the answer to the social ritual should be -- another fleeting 'Hi.' It is an extension to the cost efficient, fast and non-involved way transactions are executed. The African students find it extremely difficult to comprehend this since in Africa everything around you is important. People don't think in terms of cost efficiency and rigid structures.

Very often generalizations were made in the classrooms on the basis of what the American professors considered to be mainstream America, which means white Anglo-Saxon. The generalizations presuppose the existence of "normalcy" for those who fit into the mainstream. For African students, the so-called normalcy becomes a mirage because this theory of supposed 'normalcy' has been developed on a kind of people, not on an abstract. Yet one student narrator recalled an instance during an induction program for Teaching Assistants in his department when a professor made a statement to the effect that "research has shown that beautiful people have a better chance to succeed. Slim, skinny, blonde people are those considered beautiful." When a statement like this is made in front of an audience comprising international students, the implication is as follows: 'Those of you who come from different ethnic groups outside of mainstream America, are not going to succeed because you are ugly; if you have trouble, do not blame anybody because research has shown that ugly people are failures, and, you fall into that category. This is a blatant imposition of the dreams and myths of some people being paraded as the norm, the reg-

ular, the scientific.

"Damned if you speak; and damned if you keep it to yourself"

Merleau-Ponty (1962) specifies: "We may speak several languages, but one of them remains the one in which we live (p. 187)." Language is both a mode of expression and of expressivity. These two modes are found to be mutually related and intertwined. The speaking-African is both a speech-spoken (parole parlee) and speech speaking (parole parlante) body.

On one level, there is a sense of language inability to express oneself to the others by means of words and sounds. The African graduate students, in that sense, see themselves through the eyes of others and behave as such. If one is to trace the mode of frustration coming from language/speaking it would be that their perceived image is unable to cope with the pace of life inside and outside the classroom: Damned if you, an African, speaks; and damned if you keep silent or keep it to yourself.

The possession of an accent is what constitutes the expressivity aspect of the speaking-African. It is visible as you keep silent, and it shows as you speak. Language is a powerful tool in constituting relationality. The English language happens to be the second, third or fourth language of many African students. Usually, when the African students communicate in English they are told they have an accent. Many of our narrators informed us that they preferred to keep quiet and keep things to themselves instead of being subjected to endless "excuse me's," "What did you say?" and "Can you repeat what you said, please." There is a re-signification of

sounds. While the African student may be speaking grammatically more correct English than the American, the empirical bearer of the meaning, the sounds, would be different which mark the African student as a person from somewhere else. The possession of an accent shifts attention to one's sounds which become the object instead of the bearer of meaning. Having an accent impedes smooth communication, making it a frustrating experience.

There was a very tight linkage between language and thinking and somehow because one cannot pronounce "coffee" correctly, one cannot think beyond coffee. The idea was that the African student was not going to be able to abstract and therefore would not be able to write good papers. In other words, the American students in class think the African student is not going to succeed as a professional. There was the assumption of a hierarchy in terms of abstraction in that if you cannot manage the simple, you cannot manage the complex. One of the narrators remarked that, "Here, what I notice is that people correlate your intellectual ability with your language proficiency and capability."[b] Some of the African students interviewed remarked that they had been cut and diminished academically because their professors considered it a waste of time trying to help interna tional students who are not proficient in spoken English because the assumption is that they are not going to do well because of their low intellectual ability. An exceptionally extreme case concerns eleven out of twelve international students who failed in a class they signed up for. During the

quarter, the professor is reported to have told the international students in the class: "Don't waste your time, you cannot manage this class. It's too complex for you." Was it not a self-fulfilling prophesy to have almost every foreigner in that class fail?

Many of the narrators had frustrating experiences, especially during the first quarter. They found it difficult to comprehend the meanings of some of the language structures used by native American students and professors alike. "The type of slang the professor uses, for example, I had to ask what he meant by 'bull-shit,' a ridiculous question to an American." [a] In one instance a narrator had resigned himself to keeping things to himself: "In class, I would be asking questions but my questions would be either ignored or hastily responded or simply rejected to make room for another student to speak." There was another occasion when the professor was explaining a supposedly new theory and the narrator said he raised his hand and remarked that the theory was not new because it had been in use since the 1930's. According to the narrator, the Professor responded by saying : Excuse me, I cannot understand your English. I'm sorry, you tell me after class."[e] From that day on, that narrator decided that he would keep things to himself instead of subjecting himself to such humiliations. Not all international students keep quiet, though. "If I don't hear what the professor says, I tell him to repeat. I know I draw the class back but I can't help it."[d]

Africans are assumed to be either inferior or exceptional. Either way, they are not dealt with as Americans; they are the 'other.' They are set apart, making it impossible for total integration into mainstream America. The African student is, in most cases, referred to in patronizing terms, not as an equal. The unspoken question for those considered by their classmates as "intelligent" is: He is an African, how come he is so intelligent? If the African is at the same level, he is invisible. Most people are invisible until they are needed. This is consistent with capitalistic logic -- supply and demand. If you need a person, that person comes to your presence, if you dont need a person s/he disappears.

Color /Pigmentation

Color comes with gradations of meaning. The intentionality of the African graduate student to meet another human being, the American, tends to be not fulfillable because of differences in pigmentation. One of our narrators told us: "I did learn discrimination that I didn't know before coming to this country. Certainly, there is no place in the world that does not have some element of discrimination but what I saw here when I came was something I had never seen in my country. Discrimination was based on not only my accent but the color of my skin. Closely tied to this was the assumption that I would not be able to make it intellectually."[c]

Another narrator observed that "if you are the only black student in a class, the Americans think you have no genuine contribution to make." [b] It is

assumed that the African student is disorganized and unable to cope with the pace and discipline of American intellectual life. The expectation was that you do not speak in class when you are not an American. That is a catch 22. African students are quiet because when they talk they find it difficult getting themselves understood. Because they don't talk much, they are thought to possess fewer academic skills.

In connection with this, one of the narrators recounted the comments made by his professor the first day in class. According to the narrator [b], the Professor said: "Here [in the United States] we are very open and expect students to speak out and express their concerns and opinions." The narrator said he thought the statement was unnecessary and redundant since it was such an obvious thing. "I did find very soon that it was not all that obvious and that actually, some professors did not feel that well when students asked questions. So I was surprised that there was an expectation about what Americans are and what the rest of the world is."[b]

Reaction: Live closer

The usual reaction of the African graduate student is to draw closer to other international students, making them "live closer."[c] Living closer does not only imply spatial proximity but language proximity as well as corporeality (similarity in color of skin). A pattern is created whereby new bonds of relationships are established among persons from the same country or geographical region. "I have some friends from Africa, especially from my

country, who I discuss my problems with."[f] "My Ghanaian friends *live closer* to me so I discuss my problems with them. I prefer sharing my problems with somebody who understands my language because I find it more convenient to articulate my problems and chat in my own language."[c] Communicating in one's native language is not only convenient but allows the expression of one's experience in a linguistic style that suits the emotions of the narrator.

Exception

Two of our narrators had a different experience of graduate school. They both had mentors. They considered the outcomes of their interaction with their mentors as an opportunity that only very few special students could have access to. According to one of them, "It [the relationship] is beyond what every student can have. Not many students have that type of relationship .... He's like a father to me. He occupies the father image in my life. He's a God-sent person to me."[d] The other student compared his privileges to that of professors and felt that he has a better deal. "I may not use my case as a standard for judging other relationships."[g]

Reduction of themes

Seeing ourselves, our relationships and the world

The essence of graduate school experiences of African students can be explicated in different ways. Looking into the experiences of African stu-

dents in an American academic setting is indeed a look into forms of negotiations of cultural realities, differences and codes. These cultural differences reveal themselves through the narration and intensive description of the students' own lived experiences. The presence of Africans on American university campuses creates a situation in which Africans compare and contrast their cultural values, (for example, their movement, interaction, and body language), with the American culture. Within this situation in which students are bound to share time and space with the 'others' the African body becomes what Nicos Poulantzas (1978) calls the visible 'political body.'

Visibility and Expressivity of the African Speaking Body

Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that: "the body is a power of natural expression (p. 181)." Madison (1990) on his part indicates that: "[T]he body is a dimension of one's existence. The body is everyone's particular way of inhabiting the world (p. 22)." The African body is 'political' since it is an identification. The body is our way and mode of existence in the world. While the body is naturally free, it is politically and culturally restrained. It is because of this political body that the expressivity of the 'Africanity' or the being African becomes visible to the others in three ways: Race or being black, ethnicity or belonging to a different culture, and finally language in terms of having accent through which one is localized within a certain frame.

On one level, Althusser (in Poulantzas, 1978) in his theory of 'state apparatuses' argues that social institutions though they appear to play diferent roles in a society, still operate within the same ideological sphere in

order to achieve the same goals, and maintain the flux and the continuity of the dominant ideology. For the Africans it means that there is no basic difference between being in the class, in the street, or at the mall or the market place. There is an essential structure that remains the same regardless of time and space.

From the interviews there came up a theme in which Africans find no difference in being in the class, cafe or anywhere else. Their Africanness always shows. It is visible to the others. The very essence of the visibility and the expressivity of the African body opens up new dimensions in their lives. Not only are they black, from Africa, and have an accent, but their situation raises a sense of inferiority which intensifies their already existing margin of difference and frustration. The emphasis on the African body as the essence of their visibilty and being different lies within Merleau-Ponty's (1962) statement:

> the lived body [le corps propre] is in the world as the heart is in the organism:it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breaths into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system (p. 203).

The experiences that the African students have with and of their bodies are not only in their being students, but in their overall existence in this society. Their lived experiences have taught them to develop ways and new modes of existence. These modes enable them to cope, overcome, or at least, minimize their frustration, mutedness, and to a certain extent, resist anger.

Historicity and The Constitution of the African Self

> **"One never does belong to two worlds at once"** (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.187).

African culture is among those described by the anthropologist, Edward Hall, as "hi-context" (Hall, 1976 p.79), because "people are seen within the 'context' of networks that 'define' who they are" (Rhinesmith, 1985 p.140). Group influences on individual achievement are enormous to the extent that individual achievement becomes meaningful only if it reflects achievement for the whole group. According to Rhinesmith, it is important for people in the interaction situation to want to have much more intimate details or background than is required by American culture. As a result, social rituals , such as detailed and lengthy greetings, tend to be important. On the other hand, the "how-is-your-family" type of greeting or social discourse tends to be frustrating to persons used to "lo-context" individualistic Western cultures.

Merleau-Ponty (in Madison, 1990) indicates that there are two histories. The first is the empirical history, the order of events or the historicity of death. The other is historicity of life, or the order of culture and meaning (in Madison, 1990). Within the historicity of life, one deals with modalities of expression throughout time and space not as events but as continuing discourse that awakens echoes from the past and the future. For the Africans, history is not a set of dates or events. It is a depth. It is co-present (Mickunas, 1992). It is a continuity which connects significantly and thereby recognizes the phenomenon of frustration and its variations as lived and

expressed by the African students. The life of African students in its relation to the host culture is a continuity of the Western discourse about and on African cultural community since the so-called early 'invention of Africa' by anthropologists.

It could be argued, then, that the image of African students in American society is deeply seated in the invention of the concept of static and prehistoric traditions and societies. The traditional anthroplogy and travelers through their writings and stories defined African cultures as 'beings-in-themselves' inherently incapable of living as 'beings-for-themselves' (Mudimbe, 1988). It is within the Western traditional discourse of the modern versus the primitive, the civilized as opposed to the uncivilized world, that these 'theories' about and on Africa and the 'guilt' of being African deserving African treatment lies.

The entire life experience of the African graduate student is structured. It involves the discovery and the deformation of the cultural codes. Traveling to the United States implies traversing into what is strange and unfamiliar. The sense of unfamiliarity would disappear into familiarity which basically means the creation of new modes of dealing with the situation or what Eco (1976) identifies as the overcoding of new cultural codes, and thus minimizing the tension of what is culturally unfamiliar and/or alienated.

Other coping strategies includes the tendency for international students to consider the dominant culture as stupid or blame themselves for the snail's pace at which the learning and assimilation of the new culture was taking place. Either of the two coping strategies results in a desire for

the students to isolate themselves from interacting with the dominant culture. The more usual method is for African students to relate to other students and persons who share similar existential experiences. Each provides mutual support to the other while reinforcing the notion that the dominant culture is responsible for their plight.

The underlying causes of frustration and (mis)conceptions of the African graduate students' experiences in graduate school stems from the way we, as Africans, see ourselves, the way we view our relationship with others and the way we see the world. Which of these do we have control over and which can we not control? Can we control the perception we have of ourselves? Do we have to move from hi-context to lo-context to fit the American environment?

Bridging cross-cultural differences must be looked at from the perspectives of the cultures involved in the interaction process and a clear understanding of the forces that shape attitudes. If students are well-briefed and oriented some levels of trust and self confidence may result from the interaction international students will have with the dominant culture.

We appreciate the fact that many of the cultural differences are buried deep in the "realm of the unconscious" (Rhinesmith, 1976 p.147), and might not be easy to overcome cross-culturally, but an awareness that they exist can be helpful for coping purposes. Programs that focus on intercultural adjustment cycles emphasize the fact that some of the experiences are not unique patterns of individual experiences but part of intersubjective exposure could be made available to international students during orientation.

Cross-cultural experience is problematic. Its effective management can be challenging and rewarding. University administrators, faculty, peers, the community (and the international students themselves) all have definite roles to play in the integration process. It is only through collaborative effort between the minority and dominant cultures that African graduate students can experience a satisfying environment during their studentship in the United States.

Conclusion

Using figures and percentages of international student enrollment to show a multi-cultural campus and all that it stands for may be mis-leading. We believe that very little is done by our universities to ensure that African graduate students are well-oriented to life and study in the United States. These students experience graduate school as triple minority students, in the sense of race, ethnicity and language.

It appeared from the narrations that there were many obstacles and barriers to effective interaction and understanding among the different cultures on the university campus. Although claims to multi-culturalism in the academic setting are not completely borne out by the lived experiences of the African graduate student, the situation can be changed. The barriers are not unsurmountable. African students, American students, faculty, administrators and the university community as a whole need to grow and learn from their daily experiences and interaction with persons of different cultural orientations. The challenge for change does not lie with the university as an institution but with persons who form the institution.

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